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## PITY THE POOR TEACHER

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At our university, we do not as a rule examine candidates for matriculation, to see whether they are ready to enter on their college course or not; we admit most of them on certificate from the high schools of the state. Once in a while, however, a candidate presents himself who cannot prove that he has gone through the high-school mill. Him we examine.

Once it fell to my lot to give the oral part of the examination in English literature to a student of this sort. He was a bright, alert-looking chap, easy in his manners, and a good deal better dressed than the ambitious farmer boys who constituted the great majority of the unfortunate certificateless class of applicants for admission with whom during my several years of service at the institution I had had to deal. I found that he had been in the high-school mill at one time, several years back; but he had not allowed himself to be put through it, since, as he explained to me, he had after a year or two grown rather tired of the teachers.

"Aha," I said to myself, "this looks promising. A young fellow of independent judgment, at any rate, with ideas of his own; not very many, maybe, and perhaps not very good ones; but still, ideas, and his own. I will ask him a question that will bring his literary judgment into play."

Accordingly, I said to him: "You tell me that you read *Lycidas* two years ago in the Blanktown high school. Please formulate, with perfect frankness, your impression of that poem."

"You mean"—he began, hesitatingly, and looking somewhat distressed.

"Tell me what you honestly thought about *Lycidas*," I said. "Did you like it, or didn't you? If you did, why; and if you didn't, why not?"

The young man looked first relieved, then intelligent, surprised,

and finally contemptuous. "Like it?" he said scornfully. "Of course we didn't like it. We had to read it, you know. It was work. It was a classic. Nobody likes to read a classic. We hated it."

I was shocked; not, however, because of the conception as to the necessary relation of a classic to the human mind that the young man's answer showed, nor even because the speaker professed so matter of fact a hatred of *Lycidas*, if I may put it so. For I knew that he really did not hate *Lycidas*, about which he pretty certainly knew nothing at all, or next to nothing; he merely hated the memory of certain extremely tedious hours in the school-room. No, what shocked me was the evidence his answer afforded that even the tender-minded student had now caught this cant about hating a piece of literature because it had a place in the school curriculum.

How familiar that cant is now! People who are entirely innocent of all substantial knowledge as to what teachers of English are attempting to do, will yet show a sufficient familiarity with the idle talk of the day about current teaching of English and its futility, to fling that gibe at the teacher: namely, that while he pretends to teach our boys and girls to love *Lycidas* and *Hamlet*—a thing he doesn't in the least pretend to do, unless he is really as much of a goose as his candid critic respectfully insinuates—he actually succeeds in doing no more than to make them hate these masterpieces.

Our poor boys and girls! How they would love all the great things in English literature, if only the teacher of English with his miserable pedantries would let them alone! How much more they would read of all the good things! The proof? See the boys and girls, tens of thousands of them, who never reach the grades in which *Julius Caesar* and *Ivanhoe* and Macaulay's *Essay on Hastings* are read as part of the school course—what notable quantities of the best poetry, fiction, and essays in the English literature of all periods they devour! How everybody, including the small boys and the small girls, used to read Shakespeare, and Chaucer, and Spenser, in the ages before there were high-school courses in English literature, with prescribed lists of classics to be read or "studied"—say, for example, in the eighteenth century!

How singular, too, and how sad, and above all, how humiliating to those of us who would realize that the language in which and by which we live is not merely ours, but a very part of us, the English language—how humiliating that it has the evil distinction of being the only one among the so-called great languages of the world the literature in which can hardly be taught without making the taught one hate it! The boys in the great public schools of England up to comparatively recent times were not very generally flogged for their failure to attend to business, when the business was the getting of a certain quantity of Cicero or Thucydides. Byron did not say that as a boy he hated Horace. At this very moment, ten thousand teachers of Latin, and Greek, and French, and German are staggering under the supremely difficult task of trying to keep the boys and girls in their classes from reading immensely greater quantities of the literature in those languages than the teacher thinks they ought to read; so contagious is the love felt for his authors by the teacher of literature in those languages, that all the boys and girls whom he teaches catch it, and they simply will read, read, read, in hours and out.

Poor teacher of English! We set him the one impossible task in all the wide range of literature teaching; and then we scold him, and keep constantly hinting that his job deserves to be abolished, and will pretty certainly be abolished when we have moved a little farther forward in the road of educational progress. Here some crusty, practical person may be disposed to observe that the teacher of English may count himself undeservedly well off that his job hasn't already been abolished. Well, perhaps that is so. When one reads what is being somewhat abundantly said about him nowadays—not infrequently, alas, by himself—one is not free from the fear that a pedagogical reign of terror may be preparing, and, if so, that it will be the teachers of English who will be the victims.

How painful it is to have to go on living despised by all, even yourself, and at the same time, keep up a brave pretense that you not only think very well of yourself, but even regard yourself as a decently useful public servant! Rare, I think, the teacher of English must be who does not in these days have more or less

frequent spells during which he lives through something very like this.

But even this is not the worst aspect of the situation in which his business places the teacher of English. It is a well-known fact that in order to teach a subject, it is almost necessary to have studied it a little. Now, as already suggested, we know what that almost inevitably means, in the case of English literature. Manifestly, if the student cannot read book one of *Paradise Lost*, as part of his high-school course, without coming to hate the very sight of the poem, and the sound of Milton's name, the teacher must be in a similar predicament, since he must at one time or other have studied it; at least, he must be in that predicament unless he is an abnormal sort of person in whose mind influences operate in a contrarious fashion, and is thus impelled to love what all natural-minded persons hate. This hypothesis will undoubtedly appeal to some narrow and superficial persons who fail to take account of the fact that not a few of the most commonplace, humdrum, and in all ways ordinary, men and women with whom one comes into contact have at one time or other taught English; and, obviously, abnormality is not a thing that can be put off and escaped from like a garment or an occupation.

Apparently, therefore, we are driven by facts to the conclusion that anyone who teaches English literature is almost necessarily a hypocrite. For is it not a part of accepted pedagogical theory now, that any teacher who wants to attain even a fair degree of success must on all proper occasions, but especially in the classroom, simply exude love for his subject? How painful, then, is the situation of the teacher of English literature, who almost necessarily hates *Hamlet*, yet who nevertheless feels that he must, out of professional self-respect, assume an expression of agonized rapture whenever *Hamlet* is alluded to in his presence! Until long habit makes him absolutely brazen, what shame he must feel as he looks into the clear and honest eyes of those more fortunate fellow-citizens of his who never studied English literature in the schools, and notes the all but divine joy there expressed whenever mention is made of any among the worthies of English literature, past or present; joy which tells more clearly far than words could do of

delightful hours spent daily by the owners of those eyes in the close and uncompelled perusal of Shakespeare, Milton, and the works of the great non-best-selling moderns! How he must despise himself for continuing to accept the taxpayer's money when he notes the scowling disgust that frequently comes into the faces of the members of his class—when, for example, he instructs them to be ready by tomorrow to prove and formulate their love for the *Merchant of Venice*—and contrasts these indications of what he is accomplishing, with the evidence of his superfluity notoriously afforded by the sight of young persons whom necessity or indisposition has kept out of the high school, poring over the pages of some great English classic, when they might be reading cheap fiction or the daily paper! Ah yes, how he must feel when he realizes that it is the scowling disgust of the sophisticated youth in his classroom that expresses his own real attitude toward the great ones of English literature, rather than the serene joy in literature displayed by the pure and innocent who abound in street-cars and other public places, and who have never sat under his blighting influence!

Ah, pity the poor teacher of English literature! Like the augur in the skeptical days of ancient Rome, he knows, of course, what a fraud he is. Unlike the augur, however, he cannot get the satisfaction of a continuous jest out of his business. For his is a grim business, the functions of which, whatever persons on the outside may think, cannot be accomplished by an almost effortless conformity to routine. To keep up the pretense and save his job as long as he may, he is compelled to spend bitter and laborious hours in the study of the hated great masters of the past, and of what other impostors like himself have written about them; and this when he would fain be whiling away delightful hours over the pages of some all-story magazine, or some best seller of the moment; a thing which even in his leisure moments he dare not now do—or even allow it to be suspected that he would like to do, consummate hypocrite that he is compelled to be—except when rare opportunity makes it possible for him to give free reign to his actual taste in reading, behind doors locked or barred!